Illinois Wesleyan University

From the SelectedWorks of Carole Myscofski

Fall November 20, 2017

Book Review: Women’s Negotiations and Textual Agency in Latin America, 1500–1799

Carole A. Myscofski, Illinois Wesleyan University

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/carole-myscofski/
In the introduction to this remarkable anthology, Mónica Díaz and Rocío Quispe-Agnoli credit the authors of the eight essays with uncovering the “discursive traces” of women from a variety of textual sources within the Latin American colonial archives (1). In the Spanish and Portuguese colonies in the Americas, normative structures of status and rank placed women, especially those from indigenous communities, far from the positions of power that produced texts usually considered part of the historical record; nonetheless, the scholars whose work is included here have located legal, religious, and historical documentation of women’s voices and agency. As the editors explain, few of the texts representing women’s experiences were actually penned by women, but women’s voices may still be heard in accounts inscribed under the guidance of men, or in the “‘delegated writing’ which included dictations, collaborations, or rewritings of their oral renditions” (7). The essays in this anthology are noteworthy not just for the breadth of subjects included, from early colonial Florida and Peru to late colonial Brazil, but also for the impressive depth of scholarship glimpsed in each case. Each author positions her work within a feminist theoretical framework, and the interpretations enhance rather than interfere with our understanding of the historical evidence that each offers on women’s ideas, creations, intentions, actions, and words. The first section of the book includes three chapters on “Censorship and the Body,” presenting lay holy women or beatas who challenged the religious strictures of the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions to leave significant narratives in the archival records. Stacey Schlau digs deep into the archives of Lima, Peru, to texts that nearly were not there, finding the testimony of beatas recorded by the very men who sought to repress their voices and authorities. In her essay, Schlau unravels the claims and counter-claims of agency and virtue in the maneuvers of María Jacinta de Montoya who challenged male authorities and justified her own life and writings in her pursuit of spiritual leadership and the “eternal life” promised by her church (34). In the second essay, Rachel Spaulding offers a persuasive interpretation of Rosa Maria Egiçíaca, a controversial and popular religious icon of the 1700s in colonial Brazil. Although Rosa died in the Inquisition’s prison in Lisbon, her “syncretic” visionary experiences survived, and Spaulding identifies her as an extraordinary religious innovator developing “her agency and hybrid identity as an Afro-Catholic” through her manipulation of Christian and West African symbolism (38). In the last essay, Nancy E. van Deusen considers the alternative strategies that beatas in Lima used to record their ideas and intentions. She argues that women’s spiritual “life writings” and their hidden voices may yet be drawn out by expanding the definition of “readable texts” to include, for example,
the “words spoken by a mystic while in an ecstatic trance” recorded by male scribes and “a list of relics of a woman condemned as a false mystic” in the Inquisition document condemning her (emphasis in original, 62). The second section of the book on “Female Authority and Legal Discourse” includes three chapters on “women’s powerful presence in political affairs” of the colonial era and begins with Jeanne Gillespie’s study of “indigenous female subjectivity” in four extraordinary texts from Mexican and Caribbean leaders (9, 106). With an adroit theoretical twist, Gillespie analyzes examples of “female discursive privilege and agency” in Nahuatl poems, Oaxaca legal claims, and mediated accounts of women’s power in early encounters with the Spanish, so that the voices and intentions of women who helped construct the political discourse of the transitional colonial communities are not lost (102). In the fifth essay, Sara Vicuña Guengerich examines “textual self-representation” within the Inca-Spanish legal documents composed to present women’s claims to Inca heritage, land, and elite status (107). In three different cases tying the last Inca rulers to their female descendants, Guengerich finds women not only recreated their own histories but also engaged “the historical and cultural processes of colonial Spanish America” to advance their rights (123). Karen B. Graubart, in the final essay of this section, views the wills composed by free Afro-Peruvian women as strategies for more than the allocation of property in colonial Lima and considers the difficult circumstances of former slaves who were themselves slave owners. Graubart argues convincingly that women attempted “self-identification” through their names, residences, and ethnicities and distanced themselves from their own past while still relying on other enslaved women as a source of income in a precarious economy (137). The third section of the book, on “Private Lives and Public Opinions,” includes two studies of women’s “successful insertion” into public life through letter writing (10). Yamile Silva uncovers letters from Río de la Plata which “provide evidence of women’s use of textual representations as a means of empowering themselves” (153). Silva places these letters within a recursive history of rhetorical styles in an attempt to suggest the literary strategies women used to “resist gender marginalization” and claim lands and payments owed to their deserving but neglected fathers and husbands (158). In the final essay, Mariselle Meléndez clarifies the perceptive use of Spanish colonial newspapers by women challenging the male-dominated discourse on “women’s condition” (177). Women entered the published debates with droll responses to time-worn complaints of women’s flaws, and employed the discursive vehicles of the popular press to emphasize the responsibilities of all citizens in their newly-enlightened age. Not all of these intriguing studies will be readily accessible to readers outside of Latin American studies, but they are valuable nonetheless. In this collection one can find models for the research needed to uncover women’s textual agency in the early modern period and the approaches that best illuminate the voices of women that may be found in the colonial archives.